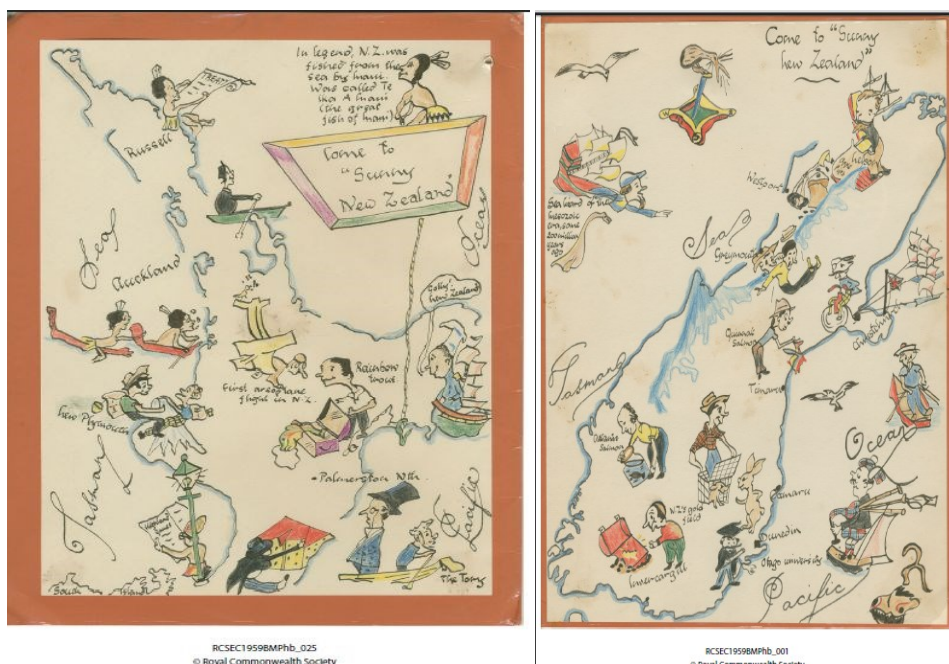


The Royal Commonwealth Society Essay Competition archive: a treasure-trove for historians and teachers

By Rachel Rowe, Smuts Librarian for South Asian and Commonwealth Studies, University of Cambridge

Many school teachers will already be familiar with the [Royal Commonwealth Society's essay competition](#). Held annually, and open to school children throughout the Commonwealth, the competition now attracts thousands of entries. In 2011, over 6000 submissions were received – essays, stories or poems on the theme of 'Women as agents of change' – and [prizes](#) were won by children in Hong Kong, India, Kenya, Pakistan and Singapore.



(Picture credit: Heather Balfour, submitted as covers for a tourist brochure in 1959)

The competition was launched in 1883, when school children and university students in the United Kingdom were encouraged to compete for money prizes by submitting essays on set imperial topics. The competition took off only after 1913 however, when it was decided to open the competition to students throughout the empire. Sadly, none of the earliest essays survive in manuscript form, but essays submitted by school children are still held in Cambridge University Library from 1922-1960, from 1976/77-1979/80, and from 1982/3-1984/5.

Early topics focussed on the workings of the empire, with 16-18 year-olds being asked in 1922, to explain "How far is the principle of self-government recognised in the British Empire today?" Under 14 year-olds had to "Write a life of General Gordon and point out how it affected the development of the British Empire." By 1924 the older children were given a choice of three topics: "The value of Imperial conferences", "How far is the British Empire a self-contained economic unit?" or "The British Empire Exhibition, 1924" And in 1926 the youngest children could either "Give an account of an ocean voyage from a British port to the Islands of the South Seas" or "The Wild Beasts of the Empire."

Some of the younger children's essays were beautifully illustrated.



(Picture credit: Flying fish and schooner submitted by Felix Gange in 1926)

The early essays often incorporated school mottos, a practice which seems to have died out by 1932.

Gradually the topics of essays changed, reflecting the current concerns of the day. In 1940 the archive reveals that Mr A. T. Milne, for many years the chief examiner of the competition, was unable to undertake the work that year as he was on active service. Fourteen-sixteen year-olds were asked "How have your home life and education fitted you to help the British Empire in this time of war?" and under 14 year-olds invited to "Write a letter to any boy or girl in another part of the British Empire describing how the war has affected you and those around you."

The significance of major developments in transport and communication are reflected in the archive. In 1943, 14-16 year-olds were asked to "Discuss the development of Air Transport as an Imperial link" and in 1944 "Radio as a link between peoples of the British Empire". In 1950 over-16 year-olds discussed "The Colombo Conference of 1950 as illustrating the Problems and Opportunities of the British Commonwealth today"; whilst in 1953 the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II provided the theme for all age groups.

"The Commonwealth is not breaking up but growing up. Discuss" provided the topic for older pupils in 1957, and throughout the 1980s children were asked to discuss the future of the Commonwealth. The '[Commonwealth Conversation](#)' organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society in 2009-2010 shows how relevant these questions remain today. The [Commonwealth essay competition](#) is just one of several [youth projects](#) currently organised by the Royal Commonwealth Society.

To read a history teacher's perspective on the archive, see Dr Seán Lang's article 'The Empire writes back' in the Times Educational Supplement, 13 February 2004, pages 6-7.

Dr Lang will give a talk entitled 'Essays of Empire' at Cambridge University Library, in the Morison Room, on Thursday 27 October 2011 at 5 pm, as part of the University of Cambridge's [Festival of Ideas](#). There is no charge to attend, but places must be reserved. To book: telephone 0845 271 3333 or online at www.angliaruskcommunity.eventbrite.com/

Using the archive:

Teachers and researchers keen to exploit the content of the [RCS essay competition archive](#) are advised to first browse the collection by 'Issue date'. Click on this button and you will find the essays listed chronologically.

An additional document in the archive, entitled [Observations](#), gives the names of adjudicators, the number of entries received for each category of the competition, details of prizes awarded, and some additional information gleaned from the archive at the time of digitisation. To view the original essays, including non-prize-winning entries, it is necessary to make an appointment to visit the Library. Contact the [RCS Librarian](#), Rachel Rowe.

Digitisation of the prize-winning essays in the archive was skilfully and enthusiastically completed by Lawrence Brooks, working as a volunteer for the RCS library collection.

Copyright in the essays resides with the Royal Commonwealth Society. Anybody wishing to re-publish the essays in any format should seek permission from the Society.

The RCS Essay Competition archive forms part of the [Library](#) of the Royal Commonwealth Society, itself part of Cambridge University Library since an appeal to save it for the nation in 1993. A brief [history](#) is of the collection is available online.